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ABSTRACT

Through a partnership with a large research institution, an historically Black university in the rural southeast transformed its Applied Psychology course from the traditional lecture format to a service learning experience. This new format integrates community service with academic instruction and focuses on developing critical thinking skills and civic responsibility in students. This article describes how the course was redesigned and the impact the course had on the undergraduate participants. Fourteen junior and senior level psychology majors (all African-Americans with a mean age of 22.7 years) registered for the course. During the course, students were trained to mentor at-risk, African-American middle school children in the community adjacent to the university. When surveyed at the end of the course, all of the course participants agreed that this was one of the best courses they had taken in college, and the majority of the students agreed that the course increased their interest in public service activities. The benefits of partnerships between research institutions and smaller colleges, and the importance of service learning experiences for undergraduate psychology majors are discussed. (EMK)

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Running Head: The Applied Psychology Course

Creating opportunities for service learning through the applied psychology course

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ABSTRACT

Through a partnership with a large research institution, a Historically-Black University (HBCU) in the rural Southeast transformed its Applied Psychology course from the traditional lecture format to a service learning experience. This article describes how the course was redesigned and the impact of the course on the undergraduate participants. Fourteen junior and senior level psychology majors (all African-Americans with a mean age of 22.7 years) registered for the course. During the course, students were trained to mentor at-risk, African-American middle school children in the community adjacent to the HBCU. When surveyed at the end of the course, all of the course participants agreed that this was one of the best courses they had taken in college, and the majority of the students agreed that the course increased their interest in public service activities. The benefits of partnerships between research institutions and smaller colleges, and the importance of service learning experiences for undergraduate psychology majors are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, colleges and universities have been asked by students, parents, the business community, and even state governments to examine the quality of students they produce, and to re-evaluate the requirements students are asked to fulfill before completing their post-secondary degrees. Increasingly, institutions have been asked to incorporate "real world" experiences into undergraduate curricula so that students who enter the workforce after graduating are better prepared for the realities of the work world.

One strategy for infusing these experiences into the college curriculum is *service learning.* The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) defines service learning as instruction that integrates "community service with academic instruction", and focuses on developing "critical thinking skills and civic responsibility" in students (AACC website, 1998).
This approach to learning has been described by many educators (e.g., AACC, 1988; Cheney, 1989) and endorsed as an important strategy for enhancing psychology education for undergraduate students (e.g., Andreoli-Mathie, Beins, Benjamin, Ewing, Ijima-Hall, Henderson, McAdam, and Smith, 1993).

This article describes how a Historically-Black College/University (HBCU) in the rural southeast transformed its applied psychology course into a service learning activity for undergraduate psychology majors, and the impact of this experience on the undergraduates who participated in the course.

RATIONALE

A researcher at a large, traditionally White university in the Southeast solicited the assistance of the psychology department at the HBCU in 1996. His project studied the impact of mentoring and skills training on the academic achievement and problem behaviors of at-risk middle school children. The researcher wanted to study a sample of children in the rural area surrounding the HBCU, and contacted the psychology department at the HBCU in order to recruit a cadre of Black undergraduate psychology majors to serve as mentors for the middle-schoolers. In order for

the students at the HBCU to receive maximum benefit from the experience, it was determined that the undergraduates should receive course credit for their service as mentors. The applied psychology course was selected as an appropriate vehicle to achieve this goal.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Students were only allowed to register for the Applied Psychology course if they were junior or senior undergraduate psychology majors, and were willing to travel to the middle school once each week to mentor the high-risk students. Fourteen students (11 female, 3 male) registered for the course. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of the students were seniors, and twenty-one percent (21%) were juniors. All of the student mentors were African American, and their average age was 22.7 years (age range, 20 to 37 years).

METHOD

During the sixteen-week academic semester, the students were trained for their responsibilities as mentors/trainers by the faculty member who taught the Applied Psychology course. (The faculty member was trained by the researcher.) Students met in a traditional classroom setting at the HBCU twice a week and learned skills in the following areas:

1. *Establishing rapport with adolescents in groups*
2. *Social Skills Building*
3. *Dealing with emotions in self and others*
4. *Social Problem-Solving*
5. *Self-Control*
6. *Terminating involvement with adolescent groups*

PROCEDURES

After four weeks of preliminary training, the student mentors met with the middle-school students for one hour each week for twelve weeks. During these weekly sessions, the student mentors trained the at-risk students to utilize the social skills they had learned in the college classroom.

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RESULTS

At the end of the applied psychology course, the fourteen student mentors were surveyed to determine the impact of this service learning experience. The survey questions and the students' responses are detailed in Table 1. Overall, the majority of the students responses indicate that the course was a positive experience, and useful as a part of the undergraduate psychology curriculum. Students ***strongly agreed*** that the course was one of the best they had taken during college (86%); helped them understand psychological concepts more thoroughly (71%); made them more interested in public service (71%); made them feel more competent as future professionals (64%); that the course should be required for all psychology majors (86%); and that the at-risk children benefited from the mentoring sessions (50%).

CONCLUSIONS

This service learning project benefited all parties who were involved. The researcher at the traditionally White institution benefited because he was able to obtain a cadre of well-trained Black mentors who were unavailable at his own institution. The students at the HBCU benefited because they received academic credit for hands-on experience in the community. The at-risk children benefited from the mentoring experience because they learned social skills which may help them avoid high-risk behaviors in the future. This experience illustrates the importance of collaborative partnerships between research universities and smaller colleges, and between college students and their communities. The benefits of this collaboration were reciprocal, in that each party had something positive and unique to offer the others. Since many psychology majors will enter the workforce immediately after graduation, providing them service learning experiences such as these at the undergraduate level will enhance their educational experiences and help prepare them for work.

Table 1

Students Responses to Course Evaluation Survey (N=14)

Response Code: SA=Strongly Agree/ A=Agree/ D=Disagree/ SD= Strongly Disagree

1.	*Course is one of the best I've taken.*	SA=86%	A= 14%	D=0	SD=0
2.	*I feel I can use psychology in the future.*	SA=71%	A=29%	D=0	SD=0
3.	*Course helped me understand psychological concepts.*	SA=71%	A=29%	D=0	SD=0
4.	*I am more interested in psychological research now.*	SA=36%	A=50%	D=14%	SD=0
5.	*I am more interested in public service now.*	SA=71%	A=29%	D=0	SD=0
6.	*I feel more competent as a future professional.*	SA=64%	A=36%	D=0	SD=0
7.	*I am more interested in working with youth now.*	SA=57%	A=36%	D=7%	SD=0
8.	*Course should be required for all psychology majors.*	SA=86%	A=7%	D=7%	SD=0
9.	*I am more willing to do volunteer work now.*	SA=64%	A=36%	D=0	SD=0
10.	*I feel the middle-school students benefited from my participation in the course.*	SA=50%	A=50%	D=0	SD=0
11.	*I would like to be a mentor again in the future.*	SA=93%	A=7%	D=0	SD=0
12.	*This is the first time I've really felt involved in psychological research.*	SA=57%	A=36%	D=7%	SD=0

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*See the AACC website: "www.aacc.nche.edu" for many additional references.

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